

Mark – The First Gospel

012 –Summary: Cycle Two – Mark 6:1-13

All outlines, audio recording of discussions, and works referenced may be accessed and viewed at <http://markthefirstgospel.blogspot.com/> .

First Thoughts

Could it be that Mark intended the parable of the Sower and Jesus' explanation of it (4:1–20) to serve as an interpretive guide for all of these problems of speaking and hearing about the kingdom of God?¹

In this two passages, Mark brings back many of the key motifs that have appeared earlier: synagogue on the Sabbath, people's astonishment of Jesus' teachings, the nature of "family", questioning Jesus' source of authority, his rejection, the Twelve, and the nature of evangelism.

This second cycle opened in chapter three with similar motifs, though rather than sending out of the Twelve, it was their calling. The interim passages described the initial teaching of his disciples. Now that they have experienced Jesus' teachings and the invasion of the kingdom of God, they are sent out to spread the gospel.

Familiarity Breeds Contempt

People cannot get beyond the shared assumptions and biases that stem from the most local of cultural institutions, the family and the village; one might as well be in Plato's cave, where people mistake for reality the shadows they have always been familiar with.²

6:1 He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.² And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.⁴ And Jesus said to them, "A prophet

¹ Feasting: Mark, location 5888.

² Feasting: Mark, location 5894.

is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.”⁵ And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. ^{6a} And he marveled because of their unbelief. (ESV)

Commentaries

By this point in the Gospel, the hearer/reader is used to Mark's frequent mention that the unclean spirits recognize Jesus—a fine bit of irony. Here, however, at the beginning of chapter 6, what binds Jesus' hands is no unclean spirit per se. One almost wishes for the simplicity of an unclean spirit who would recognize Jesus and then skedaddle. The resentment of friends and family, by contrast, is a resistance far more entrenched and costly—rocky ground, indeed, for a sower.³

Instead, one finds a sober recognition that established habits of mind are powerful in resisting any gospel that would alter the balance of social power. Or do we think it is by coincidence that only those on the margins of society who have been healed by Jesus and the demons who have been expelled by him know who he is and proclaim him? ... The failure of Jesus' family and village to recognize him is an object lesson in discipleship and offers us a realistic wisdom about the realities of social and theological change: Do not be so sure that you are going to be successful; the forces arrayed against courage and compassion are significant, entrenched, and morally defended.⁴

He is reading and interpreting Scripture in fresh new ways, suggesting pressing human need trumps religious ritual and rules every time (2:25–28). Is it any wonder the locals are worried Jesus is coming to town? Unlike most hometown preachers, he is not a guardian of the status quo but its most potent critic... As Luke tells the tale (Luke 4:16–30), the crowd in Jesus' hometown synagogue initially warmed to his message (Luke 4:22); but when Jesus had the audacity to suggest God's love extends even to those outside the clan, namely, to ethnicities and social classes many thought were banned from the heart of God, the members of First Church of Nazareth quickly changed from a sleepy congregation to a killing mob (Luke 4:28).⁵

In this passage, Mark shows that Jesus was under fire. His identity was put into question because he was too familiar and ordinary.⁶

Jesus' encounter with his compatriots in his hometown (patrida, identified in 1:9 as Nazareth) synagogue presents the evangelist with the opportunity to clarify the audience's understanding of "faith" and "unbelief." It is not enough to believe that

³ Feasting: Mark, location 5903.

⁴ Feasting: Mark, locations 5917, 5920.

⁵ Feasting: Mark, location 5940, 5944.

⁶ Feasting: Mark, location 6015.

Jesus has the power to exorcise and heal; true faith recognizes in these activities the inbreaking of God's reign.⁷

The people of Nazareth are like the seed that fell beside the path; they never take root. Their opinions about who Jesus is stand in their way. Jesus' combination of human ordinariness and divine power makes no sense to them.⁸

It is certainly the case that the evangelist advocates faith on the part of those who seek healing or exorcism... Clearly, faith leads to miracles in Mark... [However,] the evangelist demands faith and forbids doubt (11:22- 24) without going on explicitly to exclude doubters from God's miraculous help... When we examine the Markan miracle stories carefully, we discover that faith cannot be said to be a condition for miracles in any absolute sense.⁹

In the Jewish background of Jesus, wisdom connoted knowledge of God and his purposes, and so had to do specifically with religious teaching, though this religious teaching might address almost any question of human life. To portray Jesus as a teacher of wisdom in 6:2 is to describe him as one perceived as giving revelation of God.¹⁰

The entire congregation was astonished at his teaching, which prompted questions concerning the source of his doctrine and wisdom and of the power which had been exhibited elsewhere in miracles of healing and exorcism. It is possible that the people entertained the dark suspicions voiced earlier by the Jerusalem scribes (Ch. 3:22).¹¹

The Marcan text as it stands is derogatory. "Is not this the carpenter?" means, Is he not a common worker with his hands even as the rest of us are? The additional phrase "the son of Mary" is probably disparaging. It was contrary to Jewish usage to describe a man as the son of his mother, even when she was a widow, except in insulting terms.¹²

It is not Mark's intention to stress Jesus' inability when he states that he could perform no miracles at Nazareth. His purpose is rather to indicate that Jesus was not free to exercise his power in these circumstances. The performance of miracles in the absence of faith could have resulted only in the aggravation of human guilt and the hardening of men's hearts against God.¹³

⁷ Reading Mark, 6:1-6.

⁸ Reading Mark, 6:1-6.

⁹ Reading Mark, 6:1-6.

¹⁰ UBC: Mark, 6:1-6a.

¹¹ NICNT: Mark, 6:2-3.

¹² NICNT: Mark, 6:2-3.

¹³ NICNT: Mark, 6:5-6a.

Apparently Jesus had not anticipated the reaction of the people. The statement that he "marveled" is the sole instance when Mark uses this verb of Jesus. It vividly suggests the degree of resistance he encountered in Nazareth.¹⁴

Discussion

1. General consensus is that "hometown" is Nazareth. What are hometown receptions like?
2. Jesus is invited to expound upon the day's scripture. (Luke's parallel account in chapter 4 implies that the passage was Isaiah 61, and adds a few more details about why the townspeople became so incensed with Jesus.)
3. What are some reasons why Jesus is rejected?
4. There is no recognition of Jesus; only questions. There is not a flicker of faith in Mark's account. His family and acquaintances lend more credibility and burden-of-proof to what they "know" about his origins over what Jesus is currently doing. How might our knowledge of the past interfere with the work of God in the present?
5. Background: Asclepius at Corinth.¹⁵
6. Why could Jesus not do mighty works in his hometown? Is faith a precondition for works? What are the results of mighty works?
7. Jesus seems genuinely surprised with the unbelief in his hometown. What does this say about Jesus?
8. What does this passage say about faith? About family? About discipleship? About the gospel work?

¹⁴ NICNT: *Mark*, 6:5-6a.

¹⁵ *Reading Mark*, 6:1-6. "... The author of Mark understands miracle stories to function in much the same way that inscriptions and votive offerings functioned in the Asclepius cult at Epidauros and Corinth. At Corinth plaster models of body parts, each representing a healing of the limb or organ represented, were hung on the temple walls. These functioned partly as offerings of thanksgiving, but also as an encouragement to sick people coming to the temple for a cure. At Epidauros the votives took the form of tablets inscribed with accounts of the cures. One of these is particularly relevant to the issue of the relationship between faith and miracle.

A man who was paralyzed in all his fingers except one came as a suppliant to the god. When he was looking at the plaques in the sanctuary, he didn't believe in (*apistei*) the cures and was somewhat disparaging of the inscriptions. Sleeping here, he saw a vision. It seemed he was playing the knucklebones below the temple, and as he was about to throw them, the god appeared, sprang on his hand and stretched out the fingers. When the god moved off, the man seemed to bend his hand and stretch out his fingers one by one. When he had straightened them all, the god asked him if he would still not believe (*apistesoi*) the inscriptions on the plaques around the sanctuary and he answered no. "Therefore, since you doubted (*apisteis*) them before, though they were not unbelievable (*ouk apistois*), from now on," he said, "your name shall be 'Unbeliever'" (*Apistos*). When day came he left well. (A3, LiDonnici trans.)

In this story the inscribed miracle stories around the sanctuary do not have the desired effect at first; the patient does not have faith after reading them. In his healing dream he abandons his unbelief after Asclepius heals his hand. The miracle leads to faith. Of course, the point of this inscription is to inspire faith in those who read it, but it bears witness to the notion that though faith in Asclepius' healing power is expected of suppliants, unbelief does not necessarily prevent the desired healing."

Apostles Sent Out

Compared with the Twelve, we act as though we were sent out to be tourists rather than disciples in the world. We plan, pack, and go.¹⁶

6:6b *And he went about among the villages teaching.*

⁷*And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts— ⁹but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. ¹⁰And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. ¹¹And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. ¹³And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them. (ESV)*

Commentaries

Simplicity marks not only the figure of a sage, but a transparency of purpose. The Twelve come with open hands, neither offering wealth in exchange for receiving the good news nor asking for money.¹⁷

No one, not even God, can (or will) control another’s response (6:6a). The disciple’s calling is faithfulness, not success.¹⁸

Might the witness we bear to the gospel at home also be touristlike? Our family wants and our business practices tend to be all about us, our church an institution that exists to meet our needs. To live as a tourist, even at home, is to live in a social bubble that negates our witness to the gospel. We were made to live in deep and abiding relation to one another and to order our corporate lives in relation to the common good. We glimpse this life when we choose to be vulnerable to the neighbor and the stranger, knowing the hurts, the needs, and the worth of the other. That is how disciples of Jesus Christ travel through life. Jesus sent his disciples out to be companions and friends, not tourists.¹⁹

The center of this pericope focuses on the instructions to the disciples. These very likely reflect the views of the evangelist, whatever relationship they may have had to

¹⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6238.

¹⁷ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6105.

¹⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6163.

¹⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6242.

any actual instructions given by Jesus (cf. the different and at points contradictory instructions in Matt 10:5- 42 and Luke 10:2- 16).²⁰

They were not to dishonor the home by accepting more comfortable provisions offered by another host.²¹

Discussion

9. Gospel work is not about success – it's about faithfulness. Jesus does not let acceptance or rejection keep in from moving on.
10. The disciples are still full of unbelief (as earlier stories as well as subsequent stories show). Yet it does not stop Jesus from sending them out as apostles. What does this tell us about gospel work today?
11. Are these instructions prescriptive or descriptive?
12. Background: Tradition of "sending out" and the locality and temporality of the command.²²
13. Background: The concept of judgment associated with shaking of the dust.²³
14. What is gospel proclamation? (C.f., 3:14-15.)
15. Is our Christian life more spectator (tourist) or participant (apostle)?
16. What does this passage say about missions and the gospel work?

²⁰ *Reading Mark, 6:7-13, 30.*

²¹ *NICNT: Mark, 6:10-11.*

²² *NICNT: Mark, 6:7-9.* "The commissioning of the Twelve has a rich background in the juridical practice of Judaism, which recognized the official character of actions performed by authorized individuals. Reduced to its simplest form, the law acknowledged that "the sent one is as the man who commissioned him." This formulation lies behind the mission of the Twelve, who are sent forth as "appointed representatives" of Jesus in the legal sense of the term... The fulfilment of a commission by pairs of messengers is attested elsewhere in Judaism. The division of the Twelve into groups of two conforms their mission to the Mosaic provision that the truthfulness of a testimony is to be established "by the mouth of two witnesses." There is in the context no thought of the creation at this time of a permanent office, but rather the fulfilment of a specific commission. This is an important consideration; it signifies that the instructions which Jesus gave to the disciples do not have a general and permanent validity. They are relevant to this particular commission. The insistence that the disciples take neither food nor money, but depend wholly on hospitality, is a matter of special authorization within limits which were both local and temporary."

²³ *NICNT: Mark, 6:10-11.* "There would be villages where no hospitality would be offered and where their word would not be tolerated. In this situation they were to shake the dust from their feet, as a testimony and warning to the villagers, and go elsewhere. This instruction is intelligible in the light of Jewish practice. It was the custom of pious Jews who had travelled outside of Israel to remove carefully from their feet and clothing all dust of the alien lands in which they had travelled. By this action they dissociated themselves from the pollution of those lands and their ultimate judgment. An analogous action on the part of the disciples would declare that a village was pagan in character. It would provide warning that the disciples had fulfilled their responsibility and that those who had rejected the mission would have to answer to God... This provision indicates that the coming of the disciples, like that of Jesus himself, had the character of sifting and gathering the true people of God."

Summary

Our problem is that most of us would like to be disciples all our lives and never have to risk ourselves and our dignity by becoming apostles. We like the comforts of the cocoon rather than the uncertainties of the wider world.²⁴

- a. Do we want a big, powerful, all-knowing God? Or God who is in the ordinary things of life?
- b. Are religious traditions good or bad? Do they help or hinder our spiritual lives?
- c. Does having faith increase the possibility of the manifestation of “mighty works”? How does the evidence that Jesus sometimes worked miracles without any faith on the part of the recipient contribute to this discussion? What is the purpose of miracles?
- d. How does Jesus’ reception in his hometown contribute to the discussion of the parables and miracle stories of chapters 4-5?
- e. What is the core of the gospel? What is the effect of the gospel? Do we sometimes confuse the gospel with its effects?
- f. Should Christians plan their ministry and evangelism work?
- g. Having read Mark thus far, how would you describe “repentance”?
- h. We are simultaneously disciples and apostles. What are Jesus’ requirements for his apostles? Have you met them?

²⁴ *Exploring Mark*, p. 131.